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To: INR - Mr. Thomas L. Hughes

November 10, 1965

From: INR/EPF - Allen S. Whiting

Evaluation of Air Attacks Against North Vietnam

Mr. Cline's report on this subject was prepared in consultation with EPF and with representatives of JCS and DIA. It remains, however, a CIA report and we have not concurred in its language. We have agreed that its "general findings" seem to us to be as sound as our very imperfect knowledge can make them. We believe that those who prepared the report have been honest in their assessments and there is no doubt that they have done a tremendous amount of work in a very brief period.

The most significant part of the report is the estimate of civilian casualties. The other two sections, the resume of the air strikes and the assessment of physical damage, (paragraphs 1 and 5 of the summary and Appendices A and C) cover familiar ground. We have a general concern that this estimate of civilian casualties gives the impression of being more firmly based than it really is. Only a close look at the methodology can explain why we feel that the estimate of "3,900 to 5,400 casualties" is overly precise (see Annex attached); our operational conclusion is that policy judgments and especially press backgrounders should not use these figures but should employ a much broader range, i.e., "probably under 10,000." As explained in our Annex, we believe that an estimate of 10,000 is not unreasonably high; nor is an estimate of 3,000 unreasonably low.

The paper concludes (page 5) that Hanoi has "a realistic understanding of the current objectives" of our bombing program. We concur that the pattern of our attacks is by now surely clear to Hanoi: our slow progression from south to north and now into the northeast quadrant, and our concentration on military targets and lines of communications. We doubt that Hanoi gives us credit for being particularly humane or that they look on the casualties -- whether two or ten thousand -- as "relatively low" or "small." They probably focus on the "exceptions" rather than the "rules." We doubt that they realize or would believe that the destruction at Yen Bay and much of that at Vinh resulted from slips in the procedures we have established to prevent such incidents. We think that their view of these losses is likely to be comparable to our attitude toward US casualties in Vietnam, which also are very small when related to the normal death rate in the US, or even the number of our traffic casualties. We therefore think it likely that the North Vietnamese leaders are genuinely angered that we equate our bombing of the North to their support of the "just cause" of the Viet Cong, that they look on these modest casualty figures as

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confirmation of our inhumanity and iniquity, and that they are more determined than ever not to be "blackmailed" or "pressured" by this bombing program.

Nevertheless, in terms of most wars even the upper range of probable casualties is not very large. Many of our attacks in World War II killed and wounded more than 10,000 people in a single night and we could do the same in North Vietnam today. We have had "a restrained air offensive." This report gives some basis for judging what would happen if our restraints were abandoned. The report estimates that about 700,000 North Vietnamese have been "at risk" in the urban areas where fixed targets are located. This is less than 5% of the population. If our target list is extended to include economic targets in the urban and semi-urban areas of the Delta, (Hanoi, Haiphong, etc.), the population "at risk" will be multiplied by a factor of 5 or 10 and civilian casualties can be expected to mount very sharply.

Some revisions in our present rules and procedures may be desirable in the light of the report. It is clear that in bombing targets in urban areas the bombs have been spread more widely than was anticipated. The DIA pre-strike estimate of civilian casualties outside the target for the seven towns treated in detail in the report was 159. The "low" estimate in this report based on post-strike photography is 614 and the "probable" figure is 883. It is doubtful if all of these fixed targets would have been approved by Washington if the estimate in the target descriptions had been as high as they apparently should have been. It would therefore appear desirable to subject new targets in or near built-up areas to careful scrutiny before any are approved. Adequate photography of the environment should be available and such factors as the additional dispersion to be expected when pilots are under heavy ground fire should be taken fully into account. The value of attacking empty barracks or supply depots should be carefully weighed against our probable losses and their collateral damage. Restrikes, by armed reconnaissance or otherwise, of previously hit targets in urban areas should also be re-examined.

Additional safeguards against errors such as Yen Bay and the leproserium also seem in order. There is a tendency to discount Hanoi's propaganda charges as unfounded. Yet an examination of 18 specific charges has disproved none, confirmed four, and generally substantiated eleven others (page 36). If we had taken seriously Hanoi's complaints on Yen Bay or the leproserium we would not have restruck them repeatedly. Machinery should be established to check out such charges as these immediately.

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